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SUBJECT: THE REAL SADRIST CANDIDATES

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The Sadrhist bloc in the Council of Representatives (CoR) has announced its two preferred national candidate lists for the January 31 Provincial Council (PC) elections: Tayar al-Ahrar al-Mustaqil (Free Peoples Trend) and Nizaha wa Bina (Integrity and Building). The two chosen lists appear to contain most of the prominent currently serving Sadrhist PC members who are running for re-election; both had been identified by some PRTs as a probable candidate to be the "Muqtada-preferred" list. Several other identifiable Sadrhist candidate lists have been entered and may still be the primary Sadrhist list in specific provinces, despite lacking Office of the Martyr Sadr (OMS) endorsement. Both the OMS-preferred and the non-endorsed Sadrhist lists are notable for featuring a high number of technocratic professionals -- which Sadrists have been eager to advertise. End summary.

The Announcement

12. (SBU) Speaking for his CoR bloc in Baghdad, Sadrhist parliamentarian Aqil Abid al-Husayn announced on January 11 that the Sadrhist Trend would support candidate lists Tayar al-Ahrar (list 284/registration 821) and Nizaha wa Bina (list 376/registration 731) in the provincial elections. Abid al-Husayn, a Basrawi identified by contacts as close to the OMS Najaf leadership, noted that his bloc had considered endorsing several candidate lists before deciding that these two featured the most qualified technocratic candidates. The timing of the announcement came as somewhat of a surprise, since Sadrhist PRT contacts had indicated in recent weeks that they were expecting OMS/Sadrhist Trend to announce their preferred list(s) about a week before the election. OMS-affiliated mosques in the south-central region had been advising their followers for several weeks that an announcement on whom to support was forthcoming shortly.

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13. (SBU) Most current Sadrhist PC members running for re-election feature on one of the two OMS-anointed lists. These candidates were first elected in 2005 on a variety of now-defunct Sadrhist entities which have since fractured. The two chosen lists are distinct new entities rather than pre-existing parties that simply shuffled their roster and changed names. In Baghdad, Deputy PC Chairman Mahan Hasham al-Saidi, now the only sitting Sadrhist on the Baghdad PC, features as candidate #5 on the Nizaha wa Bina list. (His former party, National Independent Cadres and Elites, is not running and its 2005 candidates are spread among at least three election lists.) In Maysan, the only province with a government currently run by a coalition of Sadrhist parties, current Sadrhist PC members appear on both of the favored lists, plus others. The top three candidates on Maysan's Nizaha wa Bina list are all current PC members.

14. (SBU) Tayar al-Ahrar appears to be particularly strong in

the south central region. In Karbala and Wasit, the Sadrist PC members running for re-election are found on this list. Through its Sadrist contacts, PRT Hillah had identified this party as the main Sadrist contender in the province. One of the Sadrists on the Babil PC running for re-election will compete on this list, while the other has jumped to Dr. Ibrahim Jaafari's National Reform Trend (which is competing aggressively for the Sadrist vote). While both Tayar al-Ahrar and Nizaha wa Bina are registered as national lists, only the former is running lists in Diyala and Nineveh provinces.

The Rejects

15. (C) Several other "Sadrist" parties were apparently considered by OMS but not chosen as favored; some may in fact still be leading vote-getters among followers of Muqtada in specific provinces. Among nationally registered parties, Sadr al-Iraq (list 485/registration 825) has been described by PRT contacts in Karbala as the list favored by OMS contacts in the area. In other provinces, however, candidates on this list have been described as relatively secular technocrats -- admirers of Muqtada al-Sadr's father and uncle but not followers of Muqtada himself. Sadr al-Iraq in Basra includes several fairly prominent university and government officials with no known OMS affiliation. The leader of the party in Basra has been identified previously by PRT contacts as a proponent of federalism, which would place him out of line with prevailing Sadrist thinking, which has opposed the formation of a one- or nine-province region.

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16. (C) Rasaliyoon (People with a Message), which is not registered nationally, is running candidate lists in Maysan, Najaf, Diyala, and Babil and has drawn attention in the last province as a contender to win seats. Other parties are considered Sadrist in orientation but in clear conflict with Muqtada, including Fadhilah (174/550) and Mahmud al-Hasani's Hizb Wilaya Islamiyah (Islamic Government Party, 208/479). A few self-identified Sadrist politicians, such as Maysan Provincial Director of Reconstruction Zaid al-Hoshi, have decided to run on lists (in this case Kafaat al-Maysani) that are not considered Sadrist.

We're Educated Professionals

17. (C) While in some cases nominally Sadrist parties can be distinguished from OMS-endorsed Sadrist parties by the presence of relatively secular professionals on the list, OMS-endorsed candidate lists have taken care to feature and advertise technocratic professionals on their lists also. In an example representative of trends in the south-central provinces, all but three of the 28-candidate Tayar al-Ahrar list in Diwaniyah have a post-high school degree; many are Phds, lawyers, engineers, etc. Anecdotal evidence from the field suggests that campaign posters from the Sadrist parties (which have thus far been limited relative to the parties/coalitions of ISCI, Da'wa and Dr. Jaafari) have featured pictures of buildings, roads, schools, and professionals, sometimes without any apparent reference to Muqtada. Abid al-Husayn drove home the point repeatedly in his press conference that Sadrists want to elect professionals who have something to offer in the provincial reconstruction process. Contacts from several PRTs indicate that both of the chosen Sadrist parties are considered moderate within the movement.

Comment

18. (C) The Sadrists, knowing they will never gain the

endorsement of the marja'iyah and understanding popular dissatisfaction with the ruling parties, have every reason to downplay their religious credentials and try to sell themselves as competent, professional, technocrats in the provincial elections. PRT contacts have hinted that GOI and CF military operations against Jaysh al-Mahdi over the past 14 months -- which resulted in the imprisonment of Sadrist PC members in Maysan, Diwaniyah, and Basra -- also played a role in encouraging Sadrists to modify their means of presenting themselves to the public. More analysis of the candidate lists will be needed to know whether the OMS-endorsed parties have genuine technocratic capacity or whether they will be relatively independent from JAM and Special Group interest. End comment.

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